

## Introduction

This white paper provides a public overview of the activities undertaken by the Immigration History Research Center (IHRC) between September 2015 and August 2017 during its award of an NEH Digital Humanities Implementation Grant for its *Immigrant Stories* project. The IHRC (University of Minnesota) is the oldest interdisciplinary research center dedicated to studying immigration. Its partner, the IHRC Archives, is North America's largest archive of immigrant and refugee life. The IHRC received its NEH award to support technical innovations and a national expansion of its *Immigrant Stories* project. *Immigrant Stories* helps recent immigrants and refugees create digital stories: brief videos with images, text, and audio about a personal experience. The IHRC shares and preserves these digital stories for future generations through the IHRC Archives, the Minnesota Digital Library, and the Digital Public Library of America.

In its grant proposal, the IHRC identified three goals for the two-year grant period: (1) to design, implement, and refine an online creation and submission system that guides participants through the technical and creative steps required to create their own digital stories; (2) to use these new technological tools to expand the project's programming, education, and collection efforts in five different U.S. cities; (3) to promote the use and reuse of *Immigrant Stories* content for various audiences, including researchers, artists, teachers, students, and the public.

To accomplish these goals, the IHRC proposed that the project develop in four stages. In Phase One (September-November 2015), the IHRC would convene its advisory board and work with a design firm, bswing, to create and review the designs for a story-making website. Phase Two (November 2015-March 2016) would focus on the development of the *Immigrant Stories* website. The project team would test the beta version of the website in Phase Three (April 2016-May 2017) through workshops and trainings with five partner organizations in five different U.S. cities. The public launch of the full website was scheduled for Phase Four (May-August 2017).

By the end of the grant period, the project team had met or exceeded all of these goals, though with modifications to the timeline and allocations of funds as well as the creation of additional educational resources. The full story-making website was launched in March 2017, and the project expanded nationally. The IHRC promoted the use and reuse of project materials in more numerous and ambitious ways than initially anticipated, including the development of six new curricula to support students' engagement with the project and the project's international expansion. (Some of these activities were undertaken with non-NEH funding and the overall project was also significantly aided by the resources of a large research university.) The project team did encounter challenges, particularly related to building the website, but they were resolved by shifting grant funds to increase the technology budget and extending the timeline for web development. These lessons will be useful to others contemplating similar projects.

## **Project Activities**

The project team successfully oversaw the development of a story-making website, the immigrant-centered digital storytelling tool that it initially proposed. The tool benefitted from professional evaluation and continuous feedback from educators and members of the public across the country. However, web development proved much more time-consuming and expensive than the project team (which did not have prior web development experience,) initially anticipated.

Working within a large University provided the project team with additional resources, but the administrative bureaucracy also delayed the project at times. When the grant period began, the project team immediately began working with its design team, bswing, which had previously created wireframes for the IHRC's grant proposal. The IHRC could not convene its advisory board until January 2016 due to conflicting board members' schedules, but the delay proved helpful because the board was able to spend a day reviewing and commenting on extensive wireframes that had been completed in the intervening time period. The project team had not identified a web developer at the time of the grant proposal and immediately began advertising for one at the start of the grant period. University rules about hiring contractors slowed the process down, and the web developer was not hired until January 2016. Fortunately, in the fall of 2015 the project team connected with a new University office, the Liberal Arts Technologies and Innovation Services (LATIS). LATIS staff provided invaluable assistance as the project team as they interviewed potential web developers, introduced the web developer to the University's web hosting environment, and facilitated the website's free hosting and maintenance on University servers.

Web development proved more time-consuming than initially anticipated. A beta version of the story-making website was not live and suitable for testing with national partners until October 2016, not March 2016 as originally intended. The web developer needed to spend more hours on the project than initially budgeted, causing the project team to reallocate funds from other parts of the grant, principally money designated for national partner site visits. The IHRC negotiated a three-year contract with WeVideo for access to its API to use its video-editing software as the website's means of recording and editing audio and video. In its original proposal, the project team had intended to customize the service to make it simpler for users, but the cost would have been unfeasible.

The website guides users through seven steps to create and submit a digital story, from writing a personal or family story to recording an audio voiceover, and creating a video. The project team developed four prompts that reflected stories created during the project's pilot stage: a story about an important object, a story about a journey, a story about family, and a story about identity and place in society. The website's design allowed users to select an option to tell either a personal or a family immigration story and then to choose one of these four prompts. The project team wrote several optional, open-ended questions for each prompt to help participants begin

writing. The project team also created five brief tutorial videos. These videos provided simplified instructions for selecting a story topic, writing a story, recording a voice over, selecting images, and editing a video in WeVideo. The project team intended the story-making website to stand on its own so that a user could make their own story from start to finish without any additional training or assistance from IHRC staff.

The project team received feedback throughout the web development phase, enabling them to improve the design, refine the tutorial videos, and identify bugs. The advisory board provided comments on the initial designs and individual consultations throughout web development. The team tested the website with a range of diverse potential users in the University of Minnesota's Usability Lab in July and December 2016. The beta version of the website went live in October 2016, enabling the project team to test it with national partners in California and Michigan, as well as with college students at the University of Minnesota. The project team publicly launched the full version of the website in March 2017. The public launch was several months earlier than initially planned, but the project team felt that they had enough feedback to launch a full version and spend the remainder of the grant period fixing bugs and working on versions of the website in other languages.

Though it was not in the original grant proposal, the project team later decided to make the website available in additional languages in order to increase access to the populations of immigrant and refugee users that we would like to use the new Immigrant Stories website. Using grant funds, they translated the website and tutorial videos into Spanish, French, and Chinese. They used funds from a different grant to support translation of the website into German, Swedish, and Arabic to support the project's international expansion, and in partnership with University and international partners, promote use of the website with immigrant and refugee populations in Germany and Sweden. These versions launched in August 2017.

The project team conducted workshops and trainings in four different U.S. cities (Dearborn, MI, San Francisco, CA, New York, NY, Lowell, MA) to test the website outside of Minnesota, create and strengthen national partnerships, and promote the project. The project team had initially proposed working with five different partners over the course of a year before the website's public launch. However, the changing needs, capacities, and schedules of some partner organizations made these plans impossible to execute.

The project team did undertake planned work in Dearborn and San Francisco. In October 2016, the project team led an educator training at Wayne State University in Detroit and two-day digital storytelling workshop at the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, MI. Later that month, the team gave an educator training at the San Francisco Public Library on October 21 and a two-day digital storytelling workshop at the Library.

After the website's public launch in 2017, the project team undertook two more national partner visits to continue raising the project's profile. The team led two-day

digital storytelling workshops at Humanities New York and the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute in New York City in June. They led a one-day digital storytelling training in Lowell, Massachusetts in July at the Center for Asian American Studies. IHRC staff also continued working with local partners throughout the grant period, including the University of Minnesota, Ronald M. Hubbs Center for Lifelong Learning, Hmong Museum, and the Minnesota Writing Project.

IHRC staff also gave conference presentations and public talks at a variety of conferences and organizations, including De Anza College, Loyola University Chicago, Carleton College, the International Digital Storytelling Conference, Midwest World History Association, Museum Commuting Network, Social Science History Association, National Endowment for the Humanities 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference, Immigrant America (IHRC's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference), Oral History Association Conference, Minnesota English Learner Education Conference, Minnesota Educator Academy Conference, Lake Superior Libraries Symposium, the History Film Forum, NEH Summer Institutes in Seattle, WA and San Jose, CA, the Organization of American Historians, and Google. Staff also promoted the project via webinar, including a March 2017 Immigrant Stories webinar "Introduction to Immigrant Stories for Educators and Librarians," and as guest speakers for the Immigrant Learning Center's July 12 webinar and the Organization of American Historians' August 2 webinar.

The positive reception of the story-making website and the project's national expansion also created the opportunity for the project to begin international work before the end of the grant period, using external funds and building upon the work of the grant period. With support from Grand Challenges Grant from the University of Minnesota, the project team funded the translation of the website into German, Swedish, and Arabic; the creation of a curriculum for German language learners, and work with German partners. In May 2017, the project team worked with a high school class of German language learners at Johanna Eck Schule in Berlin, Germany to help students create German-language digital stories using the *Immigrant Stories* website. Venditto also gave presentations at European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), Germany and the University of Potsdam in Potsdam, Germany.

## **Accomplishments**

At the end of the grant period, the project team had accomplished all the goals set out in the initial proposal, though with some adjustment of the timeline and project partners due to unforeseen complications. The project team was also able to create additional project resources to support the project's goals and to initiate the project's next phase, an international expansion, during the grant period, earlier than initially anticipated, due to the project's progress during the grant period. (Links to content available online are in the "Grant Products" section at the end of this document.)

*Story-Making Website:* The *Immigrant Stories* website, [immigrantstories.umn.edu](http://immigrantstories.umn.edu), is a free, public tool that enables anyone to create their own digital story and submit it to the *Immigrant Stories* collection as long as they have a computer and internet access. A

series of prompts and five tutorial videos guide users through the seven-step process of making a video, including writing a 300-500-word story, making an audio recording of themselves reading the story, uploading images into a video editing program, creating a video with WeVideo's video editing software, and digitally submitting it to the collection if the user chooses. The website is available in seven languages, and users may create a video in any language they choose. Users make their own free accounts in order to use the website, and stories in progress are saved in the cloud.

*National Expansion:* The project team successfully engaged in *Immigrant Stories'* national expansion throughout the grant period, obtaining feedback to improve the story-making website's design, functionality, and training materials, as well as sharing the project with a national audience to increase participation. Though some of the partner cities and organizations changed, the expansion was a success. The project team conducted workshops and trained educators in San Francisco, Dearborn/Detroit, MI; Lowell, MA; and New York City. In addition, the project team's presentations at national conferences, writing in blogs and magazines, and media coverage raised awareness of the project around the United States, from ELL instructors in New Hampshire to community storytelling and archiving projects in California.

*International Expansion:* The enthusiasm generated by the story-making website, as well as lessons learned in work with national partners, enabled the project team to begin *Immigrant Stories'* international expansion during the grant period, even though such an expansion was not part of the original grant proposal.

The website's six non-English interfaces, launched at the end of the grant period, will enable future use of the story-making website around the world. Previous partners in Germany are already using with new students for the 2017-2018 school year.

*Growth of the Immigration Stories Collection:* The website has greatly increased the number of digital stories made as part of the project and donated to the *Immigrant Stories* collection. Between the launch of the website's beta-version in October 2016 and the end of the grant period, users completed more than 347 digital stories on the website. Of these, more than 110 were submitted to the *Immigrant Stories* collection.

*Curricula:* Though not planned for in the initial grant proposal, the project team developed six different curricula during the grant period to facilitate educators' use of the story-making website in the classroom and to support educators who wanted to teach with digital stories in the collection. Five provided curriculum for instructors to incorporate making digital stories with the *Immigrant Stories* website into their existing teaching. These were *Immigrant Stories* for college instructors, English language learners, high school students, workshop facilitators, and German language learners.

The final curriculum, *Teaching about Immigration with the Immigrant Stories Project*, provided free lessons about U.S. immigration, past and present, that centered selected digital stories from the *Immigrant Stories* collection as primary sources.

*Teaching about Immigration* has three units: (1) an overview of migration (2) refugee and asylees' experiences in the United States (3) the experience of immigrant and second-generation youth. Each unit includes lesson plans, optional activities, handouts for students, and fact sheets.

## **Audiences**

The IHRC intended *Immigrant Stories* for a broad public audience. From its pilot stage, *Immigrant Stories* was designed to enable anyone to create a digital story about a personal or family immigration story and submit it to the collection for long-term preservation. When the project staff submitted their original NEH proposal, they intended the website as a way to streamline the story-making and submission process, allowing anyone with computer and Internet access to create a story without direct instruction from the IHRC staff. While the story-making website does enable this, in practice the project team found that the time required to make a story still limited participation in the project. Therefore, for the last year of the grant period the project team focused its outreach efforts on educators because most participants in the project were students because incorporating *Immigrant Stories* into their ongoing studies gave them dedicated time and incentive to complete their digital stories.

Early in the grant period, the project team discussed the donation process with the IHRC Archives, which indicated its willingness to accept donations from participants as young as 15. While project staff had previously done some work with high school students, students under 18 could not share their stories. This change, reflected in the website's donation form, spurred the project staff to make a concerted outreach to high school teachers, including high school ELL teachers. Eventually, this led to the development of the project's high school curriculum to support high school teachers who wanted their students to create Immigrant Stories but needed to be provided with curriculum to do so because of the extraordinary demands on teachers' time.

The website also enabled the project to expand to multilingual audiences in the U.S. and abroad. *Immigrant Stories* included multilingual digital stories and videos in languages other than English from its pilot phase, but the project team did not have the ability to provide training in other languages. The website allowed the IHRC staff to develop a simplified training that could be translated with a combination of NEH and other funds. By the end of the grant period, the story-making website was available in English, Spanish, Chinese, French, German, Swedish, and Arabic, stimulating broader participation in the U.S. as well as opening open opportunities in other countries.

## **Evaluation**

The project team organized formal evaluations of the story-making website and received public feedback on the website and curricula throughout the grant period.

In 2016, the website was evaluated through two rounds of usability testing in the University of Minnesota's Usability Lab, a world-class testing facility. In July, an in-progress, beta version was tested, with a focus on whether the sequence of steps made sense and whether directions were clear. That December, the project team tested

the website's beta version to evaluate the full website. User feedback led to the redesign of the website's script views and tutorial video access. It also enabled the team to detect a number of bugs, particularly errors involving the video-editing software.

Testing in the Usability Lab enabled the project team, including the web designer and developer, to watch six 90-minute sessions in which a user, who was unfamiliar with the project, attempted to create their own video via the website. The IHRC was not aware of that they could use the lab when the project team wrote its NEH proposal, but the lab turned out to be a crucial means of evaluating the website's design and functionality in a way that enabled the designer and web developer to understand challenges that the project team did not have the technical knowledge or language to communicate effectively based on their work with the public. The changes that resulted from the usability session were crucial in producing an accessible, sophisticated website. The project team realizes that they were extraordinary fortunate to have access to such a sophisticated facility at no cost to the project.

Throughout the grant period, the project team conducted less formal but still crucial evaluations through its ongoing work with the public. This feedback was particularly helpful in determining the content of the website's tutorial videos and the story-making curricula for students and teachers. Prior to the website's beta launch, the IHRC tested elements of the digital storytelling training that would be incorporated into the website in order to ensure the website will be suitable for a broad range of users. Staff did so through work with local high schools and colleges as well as through a 2016 teacher training institute at the University of Minnesota. Staff also obtained feedback by presenting the website and curricula at local and national conferences. (Travel was not funded by this grant).

After the story-making website's public launched in March 2017, the IHRC continued to receive feedback from high school and post-secondary instructors as well as English as a Second Language teachers and digital storytelling workshop facilitators. This feedback allowed IHRC staff and the project's web developer to identify and fix errors as well as improve the website's training tools, including new versions of three of the website's tutorial videos. The project team created new versions of Videos Three through Five, which reflected changes in the WeVideo video editing service's interface. Most importantly, instructors at all levels reported that, while they believed the website clearly guided students through the process of creating a digital story, they did not feel confident assigning the project to their students without additional explanatory materials and a guide for how to incorporate *Immigrant Stories* into their existing teaching. Therefore the project staff, building upon earlier curriculum they had written for college instructors and workshop facilitators, wrote four separate curricula to enable instructors at various levels to assign *Immigrant Stories* as a class project.

### **Continuation of the Project**

The IHRC will fund the website's maintenance, promote the website's continued use and the reuse of digital stories already in the collection, and ensure that videos

submitted via the website are processed and added to the IHRC Archives at the project's conclusion. *Immigrant Stories* will continue being the IHRC's principal educational and public engagement project for the next several years. And it will form a major component of the IHRC's research agenda and programming. The IHRC will pay for the remainder of the project's contract with WeVideo to continue using its video-editing technology in the website. The IHRC will also pay for any additional web development, such as bug fixes, and the University of Minnesota will continue to host the website at no cost to the project. The website's code will be posted on GitHub in fall 2017 and all the project's curricula and digital stories will remain freely available under a Creative Commons license. The IHRC will continue seeking internal and external funding for community programming after the grant period to show digital stories at public events and train teachers to use the website and curricula in their classrooms.

The project team's promotional efforts during the grant period not only raised the project's profile and secured new participation in the project, and they also continue to attract new participants. During the grant period, the project team presented the project at local and national conferences, led teacher trainings, wrote magazine articles and blog posts about the project's resources, and secured media coverage. These efforts, as well as word of mouth from previous participants, led other educators, principally ELL, high school, and college instructors, to research the project on their own and have their students participate.

### **Long-Term Impacts**

The IHRC Archives and the University of Minnesota Libraries will ensure that long-term, professional preservation of all digital stories donated to the project via the story-making website. As indicated in the grant proposal's data management plan, The project team worked with the IHRC Archives to ensure that the website would generate the necessary files in the appropriate formats to facilitate their long-term preservation. A complete submission has four components: (1) video file (2) text transcription of the video's script (3) user-submitted metadata (4) a signed donation form (deed of gift).

The project staff regularly met with staff from the IHRC Archives and University Libraries to determine the specifications of accepted files and how the website would generate them. An IHRC staff member manually reviews all submitted files for completeness before accepting the digital story into the Immigrant Stories collection. If a user creates a video with WeVideo, the video is exported as an MPEG-4 file. Otherwise, if a user decides to use the website to submit a video they created elsewhere, the file must be either a QuickTime or MPEG-4 file. The website generates the video's script as a TXT file with UTF-8 encoding to ensure that non-Latin characters are properly recorded. The script is based on the script that a user writes in the course of making a video. While the website directs users to make an audio recording of themselves reading the script verbatim, users often make changes while recording. Therefore, an IHRC staff member reviews each transcription and corrects it to match the video. Metadata is collected in a CSV file based on user-submitted metadata generated from



the online form that a user must fill out in the website's Step 7 in order to donate their digital story. Information collected includes the creator's name, the subject's name, the year the subject was born, and their ethnicity. Users may select multiple ethnicities. In the English version of the website, the ethnicity field auto-completes as the user types based on the list of ethnicities used by the U.S. census. In all other versions, there is no auto-complete because U.S. categories do not properly reflect different cultural and historical contexts. All fields are required.

Finally, the donation form is a PDF filled generated from a click-through donation form. The project team worked with the University of Minnesota Libraries to adapt the Libraries' existing deed of gift into a form with more accessible language. Users may type their name, and the Libraries consider that a signature. Users must indicate if they are over 18. If they are between 15 and 18, they must have their parent or guardian's consent to donate, indicated by typing a parent or guardian's name. Students under 18 may not donate their digital story.

### **Grant Products**

By the end of the grant, the project team created the following free and publicly-accessible resources with grant funds, or with external funds that built upon the resources produced during the period of the NEH grant:

The *Immigrant Stories* story-making website: <https://immigrantstories.umn.edu/>

*Immigrant Stories* Digital Story Collection: <http://z.umn.edu/ISCollection>  
(The collection contains all of the digital stories created since the project's inception, including all of the videos created with the story-making website and donated to the project).

Story-Making Curriculum for College Instructors: <https://z.umn.edu/ISCollege>

Story-Making Curriculum for English Language Learners: <https://z.umn.edu/ISELL>

Story-Making Curriculum for High School Students: <https://z.umn.edu/ISHighSchool>

Story-Making Workshop Guide: <https://z.umn.edu/ISWorkshop>

Lehrplan für den Unterricht mit Deutschlernern (*Immigrant Stories* for German Language Learners): <https://z.umn.edu/ISDeutsch>

Teaching Immigration with the *Immigrant Stories* Project:  
<https://z.umn.edu/TeachingImmigration> (A collaboration of The Advocates for Human Rights and the Immigration History Research Center)